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## Chapter 1. 3 - Studying consumption through the lens of practice

### Introduction

In this chapter we describe how the application of current popular theoretical interest in the concept of practice has affected the study of consumption.

Although the study of consumer behaviour, grounded in psychology and economics, got underway earlier, the interpretive social sciences (anthropology, sociology, human geography, etc.) were slow to engage in empirical study of consumption. Prior to the 1980s normative macro-level critique was the dominant mode of engagement among sociologists; for instance, the Frankfurt School's analysis of mass culture and Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption were frequently reiterated. The cultural turn in the humanities and social sciences from the 1970s had a huge impact on contemporary understanding of consumption. There was an explosion of interest in issues of lifestyle, identity, meanings, experience and taste. This led to more extensive empirical research. Consumption came to be celebrated rather than denigrated, underpinned by a robust defence of the virtues of popular culture and a proclamation of the value of the opportunities delivered by mass production for populations. Spearheaded by cultural studies, research concentrated on cultural communication, both on institutions like the media and the shopping mall, and also on how consumption expressed self-identity and group belonging. Most research was conducted in the light of cultural theories which, opposing both the utilitarian and the classical sociological norm-orientated models of social action, typically highlighted symbolic and cognitive structures and found the locus of the social in those structures. Consequently, while never totally eclipsed, the unequal distribution of resources and Bourdieusian concerns with distinction were minimised. Furthermore, the cultural turn, in emphasizing the role of the symbolic aspects of communication tended to support a model of consumption that foregrounded the 'reflexive individualism' of the consumer (Warde, 2014).

### The development of theories of practice

Despite the burgeoning volume of empirical research towards the end of the 20th century social scientists seemed to get little closer to a satisfactory general or synthetic theory of consumption. Recently, however, a sustained attempt was made to commandeer theories of practice as a potential source of re-orientation and synthesis.

Davide Nicolini (2012) offers the most comprehensive review of the current state of theories of practice which social scientists might employ. He notes the origins of the concept in the social philosophy of Antiquity, but pays attention primarily to contemporary variants. His book is directed primarily to applications in the field of work and organizations, and hence some of the approaches which he identifies have no current significance for the analysis of consumption. Nevertheless his classification of approaches is a sound starting point. He identifies six discrete bodies of theorising: a praxeological approach, which he associates with Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens; the 'communities of practice' tradition associated with Etienne Wenger; cultural historical activity theory

(CHAT) deriving from marxism and Lev Vygotsky; ethnomethodology, which seeks to account for the practical accomplishment of everyday life; the ontological theory of the philosopher Theodore Schatzki, which draws on Heidegger and Wittgenstein; and theories of discourse deriving from the work of Michel Foucault. These are in many ways different and it is therefore hard to say what theories of practice hold in common. Nicolini suggests that their implications for methodology and empirical investigation are similar. Schatzki (2001) asking himself the same question said, 'Practice accounts are joined in the belief that such phenomena as knowledge, meaning, human activity, science, power, language, social institutions and historical transformation occur within and are aspects of components of the field of practices' (2001:2). He adds that a central core conception is that practices are embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding which depend on shared skills or understandings (2001: 2-3). The scale of the problem of integration is, however, indicated by Schatzki's remark that practice theory has proved appealing for proponents of post-functionalism, post-structuralism and post-humanism! Of Nicolini's six approaches, neither Wenger nor Vygotsky have had much impact on studies of consumption, but the others criss-cross the field.

Bourdieu and Giddens operated with post-marxist, primarily sociological, theories of praxis or social praxeology. Practice theories were one source of critique of the dominant structural-functionalist framework which had pervaded American sociology and which emphasized value consensus as the basis of social order. Bourdieu and Giddens were authors dealing with central problems of social theory, most clearly the unresolved oppositions between structure and agency, and holism and individualism, see Rouse (2007). Bourdieu's *Distinction*, (1984), his major study relevant to consumption, was couched in terms of a theory of practice, but the empirical analysis used concepts of habitus and capitals to understand taste and the distribution of cultural capital (see Warde, 2016). Giddens's early work (1984) made practice central to his theory of structuration, but later work discussing life styles (1991) tended to emphasize choice rather than the constraints presented by practices. The legacy of these two authors is very visible in subsequent empirical research on consumption.

Somewhat less evident is the legacy of Foucault who was an important influence on the wider 'cultural turn'. The appropriation of his work in the Anglophone world initially tended towards what Reckwitz (2002a) terms "textualism", in which the linguistic is privileged. More recently, and especially following the publication in 2004 of his late College de France lectures, the 'Birth of Biopolitics' and 'Security, Territory, Population', (Foucault, 2004a; 2004b) there has been a growing appreciation of the distinctive approach of Foucault. In his later works he was especially concerned with heterogeneous apparatuses of discourses, practices and institutional arrangements ('dispositifs') and the congruence of practices of self-conduct and techniques of power in "governmentality" (Collier, 2009).

A third set of resources for the renewal of theories of practice was found in SSK (the sociology of scientific knowledge) and STS (science and technology studies). Both contested dominant views of the nature of pure and applied science. SSK offered a radical critique of the philosophy of scientific knowledge. Observational study of the mundane processes of scientific investigation and reportage poured considerable doubt on idealised Enlightenment representations of both the procedures of investigation and status of science (Latour & Woolgar, 1986). While previous standpoints assumed that technologies were firmly subordinated to the pursuit of human objectives, STS emphasized that

technologies shape, steer and script people's activities. Problematising voluntarist accounts, technologies can be seen not only to empower individuals, but also to take over projected futures, to determine what is worth accomplishing, and to prescribe ends to which human endeavour should be directed. The strong version of the account, in Actor Network Theory (ANT), is controversially post-humanist. ANT demands symmetrical treatment of persons and things. Agency is not solely the prerogative of people, but a function of intricate networks of objects and persons wherein people's relationship to their material possessions, their uses of things, are at least as important as their symbolic meanings. The increasing attention paid to the materiality of the objects which circulate as commodities in modern economies allows things themselves to be traced, their effects isolated, their biographies written, and their contribution to everyday life, in cementing social relationships and organising household activity, to be documented. Material Culture studies, promoted most notably by Daniel Miller (2008) further elaborated the importance of things for studies of consumption specifically.

The end of the 1990s saw self-conscious and programmatic concentration of academic endeavour around the concept of practice. While Bourdieu, Giddens and Foucault – the first generation of the revival (Bräuchler & Postill, 2010) - accorded the concept a foundational role in explaining social phenomena, they did not hold as a central intellectual objective the advancement of a theory of practice. A subsequent generation was more attentive to theory development. A collection of essays, *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & Savigny, 2001), was symptomatic of a determination to operate with theories of practice for their own sake. Theodore Schatzki, joint editor of this collection of essays, clearly sought an alternative to dominant forms of cultural analysis. The essays in the collection indicated some new theoretical contributions to the practice approach. STS was prominent, but the collection also drew a good deal on ethnomethodology and to some degree the sociology of culture. In association, two intricate and detailed volumes by Schatzki (1996) and (2002) presented an extended social ontology in which practices are the locus of the social. His 'The Site of the Social' (2002) was addressed to showing how his Wittgensteinian account could be relevant for social sciences. He came to have a major impact on studies of consumption partly because he was championed in two essays by Andreas Reckwitz.

Reckwitz (2002a, 2002b) located theories of practice in relation to dominant schools of cultural analysis, arguing primarily that their focus on symbolic aspects failed to appreciate the material attributes of social life. This hinted at how the profound entanglement of consumption with culture might be unwound. Signs of discontent with the preponderance of attention in the study of consumption to culture were already in evidence. Campbell (1994) and Falk and Campbell (1997) argued against the tendency to treat consumption solely as a process of communication. Gronow and Warde (2001) coined the term 'ordinary consumption' to direct attention to those episodes of consumption which conveyed almost no symbolic meaning. The specific implications of this account of practice theory for consumption was formulated by Warde (2005) who suggested that consumption might be better approached as a moment in practices rather than as acts of purchase. In particular, by observing social differentiation among the ways in which people engaged in practices it became possible to reconnect with sociological themes of distinction and collective identity.

## Debates within theories of practice

It is hard to specify exactly what different theories of practice have in common beyond a commitment to understanding social order and action as transpiring primarily through the medium of social practices (Schatzki, 2001). Put briefly, they challenge the role of individual decision making and ideas of consumer choice, and the underpinning alternative models of the sovereign and expressive consumer. As Warde (2014:286) puts it, theories of practice emphasise different aspects of action usually obscured by cultural analysis by underscoring routine and sequencing (Southerton, 2013) dispositions, practical consciousness and embodiment (Wilhite & Wallenborn, 2013) as well as the materials implicated in consumption (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012). The appropriateness of these emphases has generated significant general debate. In the analysis of consumption, where Giddens, Bourdieu and Schatzki have had most impact on empirical investigation, a number of debates are currently live.

## The legacy of Giddens and Bourdieu

Giddens (1984) was initially found appealing because his clear and elegant account of the duality of structure appeared to solve the structure - agency problem. His emphasis on routinisation and on the role of practical rather than discursive consciousness provided a background against which to explain inconspicuous, regularised and repetitive episodes of consumption. However, Giddens did not pursue further themes about practice after his major contribution in 1984, and actually he became more interested in the expressive aspects of life styles and stressed reflexive and voluntary engagement. Moreover, his concepts rarely seemed to throw new light on explanatory problems. So while both (Shove, 2004) and especially Spaargaren (2003) and Spaargaren and Vliet (2000) wrote instructively about issues of sustainable consumption against the framework of structuration theory, few of their valuable insights seemed to be directly attributable to the theory. Gradually, as studies of consumption began to recognise more roles for the body, habits and material devices, the categories of structuration theory had decreasing purchase. The associated dilemmas, of reflexivity and routine, structure and agency, and practical and discursive consciousness remained relevant nevertheless.

Bourdieu was better equipped to deal with issues of habit and embodiment. His key concept of habitus stands for a set of, not necessarily conscious, predispositions and dispositions which people acquire as a function of their social location and experience [\(see Bourdieu, 1977 and 1990\)](#). Critics charge habitus with a tendency to pander too much to processes of reproduction rather than change, but it nevertheless captures vital aspects of the capacity for people mostly to be able to continue to operate fluently and confidently on a daily basis without need to pause to deliberate or make conscious decisions. It captures many automatic, repetitive and distracted aspects of daily conduct which subtend patterns of consumption. Bourdieu also typically emphasises the role of collective actors as a source of dynamism, and locates them and their practices within the 'games' that define stakes and allocate rewards within social fields. His concepts make it easier to think of practices as entities rather than simply an aggregate of discrete performances. Many applications of practice theory go no further than describing performances, thus ignoring the ways in which practices may be organised and coordinated. Whether practices are best considered entities (just such a strong version is proposed by Schatzki (1996, 2002) and Shove et al. (2012) or whether they are merely the

sum of multiple performances is one point of dispute. Methodologically, how best to access performances and practices is a subsidiary controversy.

Neither Giddens nor Bourdieu paid a great deal of attention to technologies, infrastructures, objects and machines, which they treated as instruments employed by human agents going about their daily practice. However, many in the early 21st century propose that the objects and devices of material culture exert a significant determining, and partially autonomous role in patterns of behaviour. How much power to attribute to material artefacts is now a major source of disagreement. The post-humanist strand of practice theory and much analysis in STS find that machines script performances. The strong Actor Network Theory version proposes that people and things should be treated in an equivalent manner when explaining social processes (Latour, 2005). Schatzki (2002) is sceptical of the post-humanist position and addresses material phenomena by making a distinction between practices and material arrangements, thereby to signify the importance of objects and technology. Who or what exercises agency – individuals, collectivities, objects – remains an active field of debate.

### Competence or teleology?

An important contribution of contemporary theories of practice for the study of consumption has been to understand the organisation of human activity as nexuses of generic types of components (e.g. Schatzki 1996, 2002; Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Shove et al, 2012; Warde, 2005). Such a conceptualisation of the heterogeneous arrays of ideational, discursive, material, embodied, and affective elements that compose practices typically places them into discrete conceptual categories. Schatzki (2002, p. 86) conceives of practices as being made up of: “practical understandings” (‘know how’, understanding ‘how to go to go’ with an activity); “rules” (explicit directions, instructions, admonishments etc.); “teleoaffective structures” (normatively ordered arrays of ends, orientations, and affective engagements); and “general understandings”, which are common to many practices and condition the manner in which practices are carried out. Shove, Pantzar and Watson’s widely reproduced model offers the elements “meanings”, “competences” and “materials”. Models of generic components do much useful conceptual work and have afforded methodological and analytical innovation (see Halkier, Martens & Katz-Gerro, 2011; Halkier & Jensen, 2011; Browne, Pullinger, Medd & Anderson, 2013). Equally, however, such schemas inevitably inflect understandings of praxis per se. Shove et al.’s (2012) foregrounding of “competence” tends to occlude the end-orientation of activity (teleology), by emphasising the competent performance of practice as an end in itself (Welch and Yates, forthcoming). Schatzki’s (2002) highlighting of “teleoaffective structure”, by contrast, emphasises ends and purposes as the prime axis of praxis, as well as affective and motivational engagement (cf. Schatzki, 2010). Schatzki’s category “general understandings”, also gestures towards the conditioning of practices by discursive formations that possess their own forms of organisation exogenous to those practices (Welch & Warde, forthcoming).

The contrast between Shove et al.’s (2012) emphasis on competence and Schatzki’s (2002, 2010) emphasis on teleology reveals different orientations towards the ends of practices. A focus on the competence of performance draws our attention to the practice as an end in itself. For some kinds of practice, perhaps particularly those readily thought of as skills, including many enthusiast or leisure activities pertinent to consumption (e.g. skateboarding, Nordic walking, hula-hooping), the

emphasis on an internal orientation to competent performance may be appropriate. The performance of skateboarding, for example, may be orientated purely towards the end of developing skill as a skateboarder. However, there are many forms of activity where the practice is a means to another end rather than being the end in itself. Ends external to the specific practice are often simultaneously the object of multiple practices conjoined through the pursuit of that end. For example, practices of listening to music and following fashion, along with the adoption of a particular argot and engagement in specific types of leisure activity, may conjoin in the heterotelic pursuit of subcultural identity. A useful distinction can therefore be made between two kinds of orientation: autotelic (activity having an end, purpose or meaning not apart from itself); and heterotelic (having an end, purpose or meaning outside itself). These orientations are not mutually exclusive, nevertheless, since subcultural members may get aesthetic enjoyment from music and skilled skateboarding can afford kudos amongst peers.

### Collective activity and politics

Considering the orientations of practices also helps us marshal a practice-theoretical account of purposive collective activity. The long history of consumer movements, where 'the consumer' has been mobilised in wider social and political fields, indicates the broad range of collective projects pertinent to consumption (Hilton, 2009; Trentmann, 2008, 2010). Studies of brand management within a broadly practice-theoretical framework reveal understandings of 'the consumer' as active co-producer of value and posit consumption as an economically productive activity, often framed through the Foucauldian concept of 'governmentality' e.g. (Arvidsson, 2007; Zwick, Donsu, & Darmoddy, 2008). Parallel notions of governmentality appear also in the analysis of sustainable consumption (e.g. Rumpala, 2011) and accounts critical of the 'responsibilisation of the consumer', (e.g. Barnett et al., 2011).

Governance projects also affect the integrity and autonomy of practices. Contemporary projects of governance often construct socio-technical objects, through (increasingly digital) processes of monitoring, feedback and statistical aggregation, which orient everyday practices, public discourse, and institutional-organisation arrangements. Shove et al. (2012, p. 110) see the socio-technical object of "obesity" as "simultaneously reproduced in 'micro' and 'macro' forms as data recorded on such humble instruments as bathroom scales are added, analysed and aggregated" into the datasets from which the World Health Organization formulates policy. Hence does moralizing public discourse find its way back to the bathroom scales.

### The interconnection of practices

A further pressing issue for practice-theoretical accounts is how practices relate to one another. If the social world is nothing but practices, understanding their interaction is vital. One can consider how much autonomy any practice exerts. Some practices are heavily dependent on the organisation of others. They may be effectively subordinated to others, or highly inter-dependent within larger configurations or fields (e.g. economic, material, temporal, spatial). Also, collective projects frequently configure multiple practices towards a common end (Welch and Yates, forthcoming).

Consequently, some practices will hold greater determining power than others for particular social phenomena. The scheduling and location of working practices, for example, strongly determines eating practices. However, exogenous temporal factors will exert less pressure on the consumption-related practices of enthusiast groups, which have relative autonomy from such institutional pressures. Whilst the scheduling of ballroom dancing or battle re-enactment will inevitably be subject to wider societal temporal patterns, endogenous factors play a greater role in explaining their trajectories.

#### Applications of theories of practice to consumption

The substantial differences at the general theoretical level among competing schools often matter rather less at the operational level when employing concepts in empirical analysis. The insights of practice theory have, to date, been applied to a number of research areas in consumption including food preparation and eating (Halkier, 2009; Jackson, 2015; Warde, 2016), recreational enthusiasms (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Pantzar & Shove, 2010; [Spaargaren, Osteveer and Loeber \(2013\)](#)), and listening to music (Magaudda, 2011). Attention is paid to the humdrum and functional properties of things, which Reckwitz (2002a) had complained were often neglected. Mundane activities like washing bodies and clothes (Shove, 2004), gardening (Hitchings, 2007), heating and cooling (Shove & Walker, 2014), using electronic devices (Røpke, Christensen, & Jensen, 2010) and waste disposal (Evans, 2011) require generic commodities like water and electricity which are invisible to paradigms concerned with symbolic display and the presentation of self, and yet have much to do with environmental degradation. These raise issues of the mitigation of environmental effects which require changed patterns of consumption

It is to this topic of sustainable consumption that we turn in order to illustrate selectively how practice theory has been operationalised in empirical research (cf. D. Welch and Warde (2015)). We delineate three areas of focus – socio-technical evolution, temporal ordering and the direct critique of a dominant policy paradigm.

First, in response to an external critique of practice theory as weak in the explanation of social change, some research now goes beyond attention to micro-scale everyday life phenomena. Advocating a “systems of practice” approach, Watson (2012) illustrates interaction between socio-technical systems and practice performances by considering interventions that could affect transition towards decarbonised transport. The key focus is the role of technology, materials, and artefacts in reshaping elements of practice and how they connect with others (Shove & Spurling, 2013; Spurling et al., 2013). In such fashion, Hand, Shove, and Southerton (2005~~7~~) explain the evolution of private showering through innovations in plumbing, heating and electrification. Novel technologies and infrastructures have thus enabled new ideas of comfort, cleanliness and convenience (Shove, 2003). Similar studies account for the domestic uptake of electric irons and washing machines (Gram-Hanssen, 2011) lighting (Jensen, 2013) mechanical cooling (Shove, Walker, & Brown, 2014) cooking appliances (Truninger, 2011), and even low temperature washing of laundry (Yates & Evans, forthcoming).

What each of these examples has in common in their empirical accounts of practice transformation is their concentration on technologies, artefacts and materials. This is not to say they afford greater



power to these. Shove et al. (2012) argue that change and stability is best understood by how three elements of a practice are related, and in turn, how practices are related to each other. Home-cooking, showering and driving each require materials (ovens, mixers, water pipes, cars and roads) competences (techniques, skills and practical knowledge) and meanings (aspirations, ideas and symbolic meaning). What may look like the diffusion of Nordic walking in Northern European countries is in fact a localised reinvention of 'doing walking' with a new artefact, the Nordic walking stick (Shove & Pantzar, 2005). At the next level, practices are dependent on their connection with others. Cooking and eating rely upon synchronisation with working and travelling practices, not to mention the performances of other social actors, both proximate and distant.

Second, Southerton, Díaz-Méndez, and Warde (2012) explain cross-cultural variation and the importance of understanding the temporal order of practices through a study of the timing of eating events in Spain and the UK. For commensality to occur, eating events must synchronise with the rhythms and routines of other practices. Temporality matters similarly to laundry where flows and sequences of activities in sorting, washing, drying, preparing and finally, storing clean laundry are important. Underscoring these examples is the strength of habit and routine (Warde and Southerton, 2012), which are similarly studied in practices of eating (Warde, 2016), food growing in urban gardens (Veen, Derksen, & Visser, 2014), home energy consumption (Gram-Hanssen, 2011), control of ambient indoor workplace temperatures (Hitchings, 2011), and showering (Browne et al., 2013). The social patterning of routines and rhythms points not only to their steadfastness but, under the right circumstances, their potential to be unlocked (Paddock, 2015), for the crossing points of practices may offer the most suitable opportunity for intervention (Warde, 2005).

Third, despite internal tensions within practice theory, it is generally agreed that empirical cases challenge the foundations of contemporary policy interventions aimed at changing consumer behaviour. Novel approaches to policy intervention arise from frustration with 'the ABC' – attitude, behaviour, choice - model (Shove, 2010; Welch, 2016). For example, the information deficit approach underpinning use of smart-energy monitors in the home is too simple, for making energy visible does not account for the dynamism of practices that demand energy (Hargreaves, Nye, & Burgess, 2013). Strengers and Maller (2015) cite further examples extending from mobilities and low-carbon housing to the divestment of domestic goods. Such approaches typically neglect the ways in which the practices of domestic life are entangled with one another (Ozaki & Shaw, 2014). Crosbie and Guy (2008), examining changing household lighting practices, conclude that policies aimed at promoting energy efficient lighting would benefit from enlisting support from wider industry stakeholders. Echoing this advice, while championing a practice theoretical approach to designing policy interventions, Vihalemm, Keller, and Kiisel (2015) argue that because practices in daily life are interdependent, so too must the policy programmes aiming to bring forth change. 'Wicked' policy problems, such as climate change, public health nutrition, alcohol and drug abuse, or obesity, demand multi-stakeholder, multi-issue approaches to intervention which aim, for example, to disrupt one or more practices or to substitute one element of a practice with another.

## Conclusions

Theories of practice have seriously challenged orthodox social scientific accounts of consumption. They raise controversial questions about an appropriate conceptualisation of the relationship between mind, body, things, social context and action. They adopt an unconventional model of action which is bolstered from a distance by developments in cognitive neuro-science and pragmatist philosophy. To focus on habits, routines and conventions, and on embodied dispositions, disrupts the dominant ideology of consumer choice (Sahakin & Wilhite, 2014; Warde & Southerton, 2012). Some critics are suspicious that theories of practice cannot handle social change, especially macro-level change, although doubts have been assuaged by Shove et al. (2012) and Warde (2014). In fact, many studies have successfully deployed narrative forms of explanation to account for change within practices, although whether that potential has yet been convincingly realized in extensive explanation is questionable.

Many other questions remain open. Should practices be examined as entities with powers? How much emphasis should be attributed when analysing performances to agency and deliberation and how much to habit, social environment and practical sense? What are the methodological consequences: are some methods, for example observation and ethnography, to be privileged, or can any of the methods and techniques of analysis in the social science toolbox be useful?

Practice theories have progressed in clarifying these matters, although the returns to theory from the recent wave of empirical studies have yet to be consolidated. Internal disputes and external critiques continue to throw up unresolved theoretical issues. Meanwhile however, recent empirical inquiries have cast valuable new light on a range of activities, processes and political issues. Novel suggestions about modes of intervention, for instance for the purposes of mitigating the effects of climate change, have emerged. Hidden determinants of patterns of consumption have been revealed. The role of acquired goods and objects in the accomplishment of everyday activities has become clearer, as has the importance of embodied experience in the formation of tastes and behaviour. The extent of possible innovation is not yet settled, but there can be little doubt that theories of practice have moved debates about consumption forward.

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